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C O N F I D E N T I A L MELBOURNE 000116

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/28/2019
TAGS: PGOV PINR AS
SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY TO TRIAL PRIMARY SYSTEM

REF: CANBERRA 188

Classified By: Justin Kolbeck, Pol/Econ Officer for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Both of Australia's major political parties are tinkering with their candidate selection processes in an attempt to reverse a trend of declining grass roots participation. The ruling Australian Labor Party (ALP) will test trial a primary system in the November 2010 Victoria elections and the Liberal Party is opening up its selection processes as well. Powerbrokers and unions, however, will resist this change. End Summary.

Primaries to Replace Pre-selection?

¶2. (SBU) Nicholas Reece, the newly appointed chief strategist for the ALP in Victoria, told Consul General on October 21 that the ALP will conduct a U.S. style primary for one seat in the November 2010 Victoria state elections. Membership in ALP branches has declined over the past decade, and Reece sees primaries as a way to rekindle grassroots participation.

According to Reece, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh is considering a similar initiative in her state. Per his request, post is assisting Reece in developing contacts in the United States who have experience in running primaries.

¶3. (SBU) Replacing the current system of pre-selection with primaries would be a political game changer in the ALP. In Australia, nominations for state and federal parliamentary seats are called "pre-selections." Meetings are held at the district branches of each party and the members choose a candidate. Because this is a small-scale, parochial exercise, ALP pre-selections are controlled by those who can bring the most local ALP members to a meeting. Unions and political powerbrokers always ensure that enough members attend a branch meeting to determine the outcome (locally referred to as "branch stacking").

Liberal Party Perspective

¶4. (C/NF) The Liberal Party is also toying with new pre-selection procedures. During an October 27 meeting, senior Liberal strategist Michael Kroger told Consul General that his party's membership has also been declining. The Liberal Party tested a plebiscite pre-selection process for the safe Liberal seat of Kooyong by opening up the nomination process to all party members in the area, rather than limiting it to a select number of party powerbrokers in the branch. This change led to the nomination of Liberal party rising star Josh Frydenberg.

Campaign Finance Reform

¶5. (C/NF) During an October 23 meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard downplayed the emergence of primaries in the Australian political system. She told Consul General that this idea had been floated in the past and instead emphasized that campaign finance reform will be a bigger issue for Australia. According to Gillard, campaign finance reform will be very difficult and will require the support of both parties. The heads of both the ALP and the Liberal Party of Australia have been meeting quietly to discuss this option.

Comment

¶6. (C/NF) Changes to Australia's opaque pre-selection process are likely to be slow and highly contentious. Powerbrokers in both the ALP and the Liberal parties will resist this change -- as one highly influential powerbroker put it: "we hold these parties together." Given Gillard's focus on campaign finance reform, the ALP will likely not be looking to revolutionize its pre-selection procedures any time soon.

THURSTON